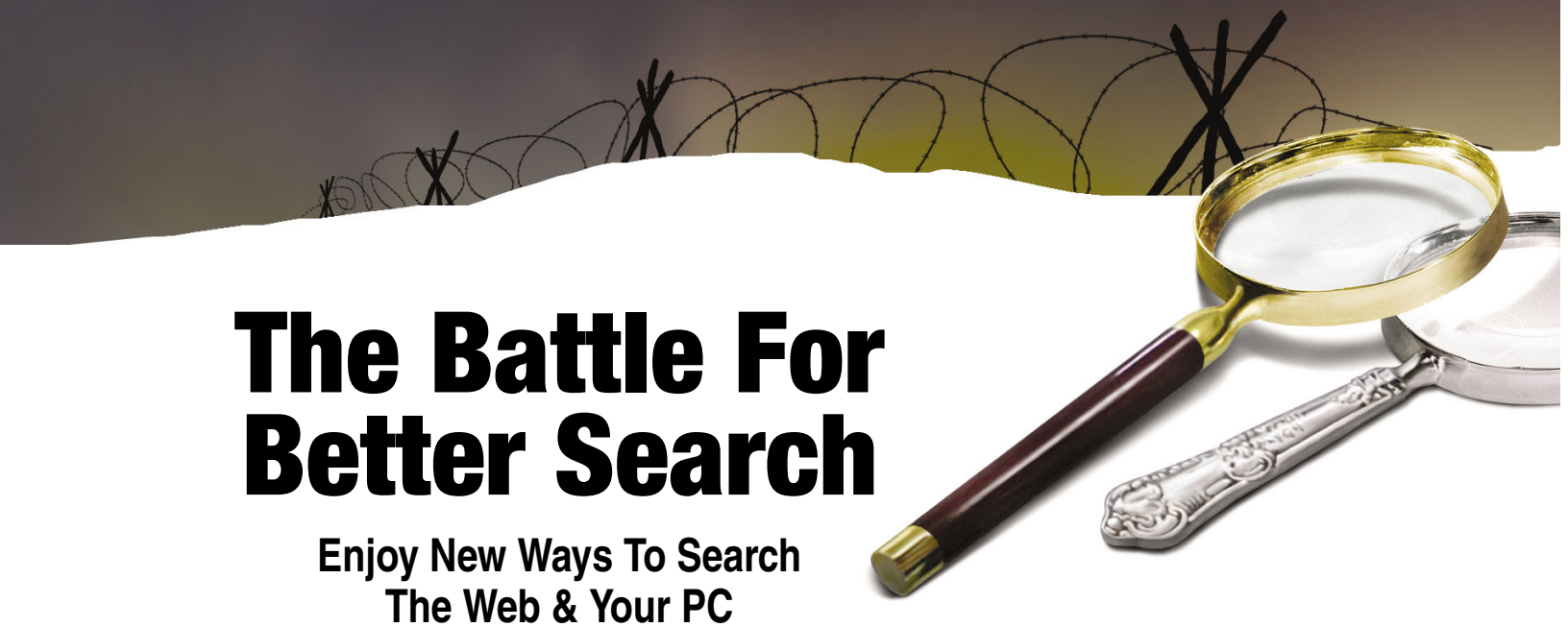


The Battle For Better Search

Enjoy New Ways To Search The Web & Your PC

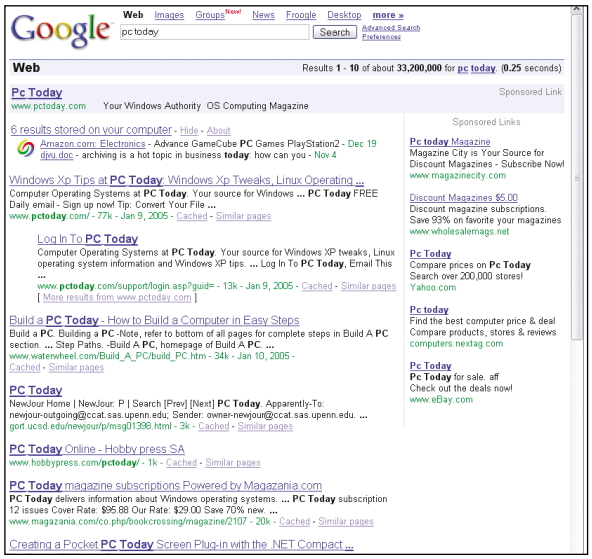
Only a few years ago, anyone who wanted to research anything needed to know how to use a variety of tools, such as a library card catalog, the "Reader's Guide To Periodical Literature," and an encyclopedia index. Today, Web search engines have all but replaced those tools. People can search more resources, faster and more conveniently, than ever before.

As we increasingly turn to the Internet to find the information that we need, the companies that build search engines are battling to provide the most relevant search results and win the most users. Microsoft and Google are the biggest players in the search engine war. As they and other companies fight to dominate search, they grace us with more and better ways to find the information we're looking for—not just on the Web but on our own computers, too.

Searching The Web

Massive Internet file-searching tools started in 1990 with Archie, which hunted down FTP files. But things really started rolling in 1993 with Wandex, the first Web site search engine. It was a revolutionary, if rudimentary, tool that would let you search on any topic from the few thousand Web pages that were available at the time. Today's search engines have considerably more to deal with: Google indexes more than 8 billion pages. Microsoft's search engine, MSN Search, indexes some 5 billion pages. It doesn't matter how you count it; there's a lot of information out there.

The irony is that it's not quantity of information that we Internet searchers need. We are usually concerned with quality: We want to find the two or three Web sites that provide exactly the information we're looking for, be it research for a term paper, information about a health issue, or just gossip about a favorite TV show. So while you want your search engine to have access to a wide array of Web sites, it is more important that it be smart about which sites its shows you.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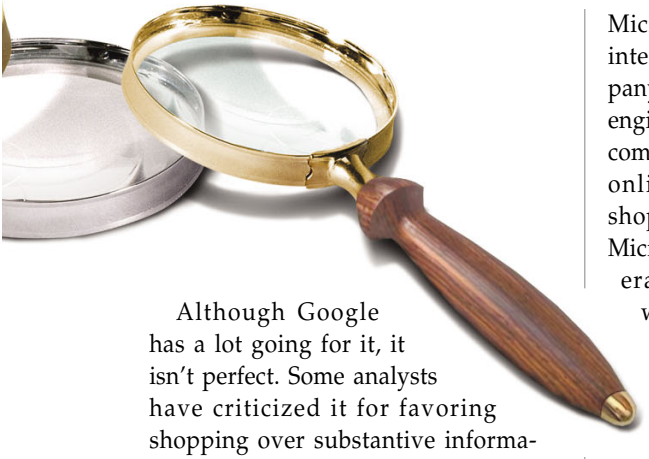
Google, the most popular search engine, faces new competition.

Google Search

Google (www.google.com) seems to be everyone's favorite search engine. To "Google" something has become part of the lexicon, meaning searching for information online. Google's loyal following is in part due to its simple and clean interface, low-key but helpful advertisements, and relevant search results. Google uses a system called PageRank, which moves more-frequently linked (and presumably better) Web pages toward the top of the search results.

Google lets you search more than just the Web. You can search the largest archive of Usenet newsgroup postings at groups.google.com, hunt for images at images.google.com, and find local businesses with Google Local (local.google.com), among other features. Gmail (gmail.google.com) is Google's Web-based email system, which provides 1GB of email storage space. An impressive list of Google services is available by clicking More from Google's home page or by pointing your Web browser to www.google.com/options.

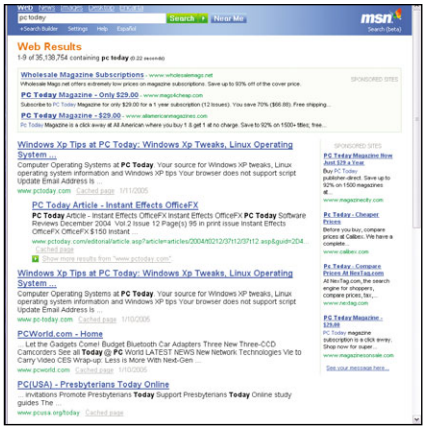


Although Google has a lot going for it, it isn't perfect. Some analysts have criticized it for favoring shopping over substantive information. For instance, if you search for "air conditioners," you're likely to see dozens of hits of air conditioner catalogs and price comparison sites rather than information about how they work or unbiased product reviews.

"The problem with Web search is that it's easy to switch—just type M-S-N instead of G-O-O-G-L-E. When you look at other types of products, an office suite, a Web browser, that is not the case," Joe Wilcox, senior analyst at Jupiter Research, says. "So what Google is trying to do is offer the consumer more benefit but at the same time making it harder to switch; if you start using Gmail, for example, it will be harder to switch away."

MSN Search

The up-and-coming search engine—and Google's biggest competition—is Microsoft's MSN Search. Microsoft is interested in search because the company knows that a well-rounded search engine such as Google is capable of becoming everyone's front door to every online activity: browsing the Web, shopping, email, games, anything. If Microsoft allows that to happen, its operating system and other software will no longer be the front door. Microsoft wants to remain the gateway to information on, and accessed from, your PC.



Microsoft's MSN Search tends to serve up very different hits than Google.

As of this writing, MSN Search is still in beta testing, available at beta.search.msn.com, but it is expected to move to a new, permanent URL sometime this year. Its search results tend to be very different from Google's; the sites listed on MSN Search's first two pages of hits usually don't have a lot of overlap with Google's top hits. We tend to prefer Google's choices, but this varies. Every search is different, and MSN is assumedly still refining its search process.

The interface is similar to Google's—basic and not overwhelming. Don't be fooled, though; there is power under the hood. The Search Builder feature lets you create customized searches, for instance, by changing the ranking to favor sites that have been updated recently or are static, sites that are very popular or less popular, and phrases that are an exact match or only approximately what you are looking for.

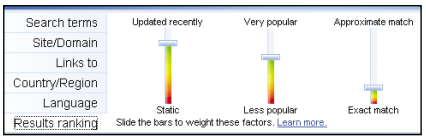
Microsoft adds value to search with its own information, too. You can search Microsoft's Encarta encyclopedia and, like Google, search image and news archives.

Google began as a research project in 1996 and rose to prominence in 2001. By comparison, MSN Search was launched as a beta test in November 2004. Many people believe that Microsoft's new search engine could eventually rival Google's, but for now Microsoft is playing catch-up in the search wars.

"'Testing' is the absolute descriptive word for Microsoft Web search right now," Wilcox says. There's no telling whether people will embrace Microsoft's search tool. It has an advantage because it will be the default search tool in Microsoft Internet Explorer, which many users don't bother to change even if they prefer another search engine.

Which Is Better?

Microsoft is a huge company that does many things—operating systems, office suites, video games, mobile devices, and so on—and doesn't always stick with what it starts. (Its nascent line of networking hardware was axed last year.)



MSN Search lets you customize rankings based on your preferences.

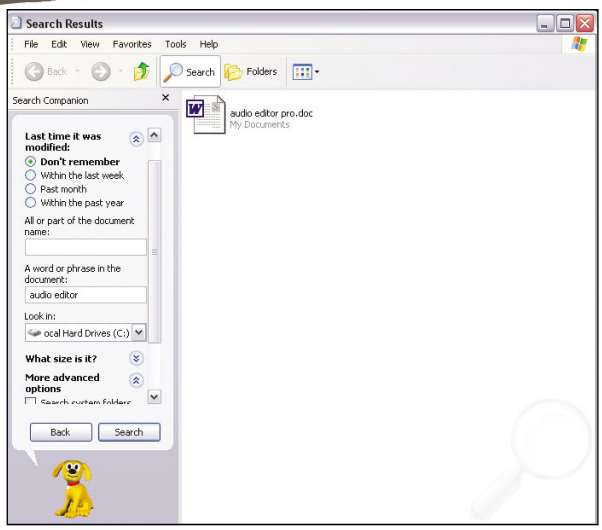
For now, it's impossible to know if Microsoft will devote the necessary resources to make MSN search the best search engine on the Web, or if the company's attentions are too scattered to compete with Google's single-mindedness.

Which search engine is better? The answer is completely subjective. Try them both and find out which one works best for the searches that you do. Of course, you don't have to swear allegiance to either. You can switch between them or use one of the many other search engines.

Search Comes To The Desktop

Forget about searching a million or a billion Web pages—sometimes the problem of finding information is a lot closer to home. The hard drive in your PC might hold 40GB, 80GB, or 250GB of data—practically nothing compared to the vastness of the Web, but that's still plenty of space to misplace information that you know is stored in some file, somewhere.

The solution is a personal search engine, a program that indexes the information on your computer and then lets you hunt through it—just like a Web search engine but on a smaller scale. If



The Search function that's built into Windows XP doesn't hold a candle to add-on search software.

you're looking for a particular letter that you wrote years ago, or the tax spreadsheet where you wrote off 30 pounds of chocolate, or class notes that you vaguely remember typing, a personal search tool can locate it for you.

Unlike a Web search engine, in order to use a personal search engine you need to install one first. There are many to choose from. In fact, there's one built into Windows XP—although free programs from other companies do a better, faster job.

The search tool that's built into WinXP (to access it, choose Search from the Start menu) might seem adequate—until you try some of the third-party search programs. It is slow, often taking 15 seconds to a minute to search a moderately filled hard drive. While it can search the contents of several types of files (such as Microsoft Word documents) other tools can scan many other types. And while the built-in tool can be useful for finding files when you remember an exact phrase, it won't help you out if those words are actually near each other or in a different order. The third-party tools can be much more forgiving.

Google Desktop Search

Currently in beta testing, Google Desktop Search (desktop.google.com) is a free program that adds Google's style of searching to your own hard drive. After installing the program, the program makes an index of your system, which can take from a few minutes to an hour, depending on the amount of information on your hard drive.

Just like Google's Web search, Desktop Search is accessed through your Web browser. The output has the familiar look and feel of Google Web search, which makes it very easy to use. Instead of opening Web pages, clicking a link on the hits page could open a word processor document, Excel spreadsheet, or email message in Outlook Express.

Google's search can hunt through your email, the Web pages that you've visited recently, and the AOL Instant Messenger conversations that you've had—even if you haven't explicitly saved those conversations to separ-ate files.

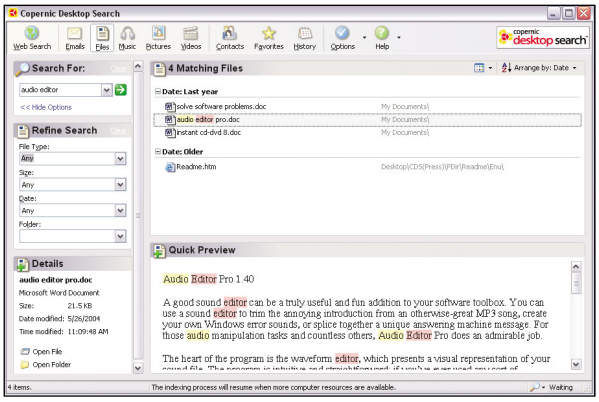
Searches are lightning fast: Results appear a split second after you click the Search button. You can even choose to show Desktop Search hits on Google Web Search result pages: Local hits are shown at the top of the search results page. This way you don't even have to remember to search your own files: They're searched as part of the Googling you do everyday.

Copernic Desktop Search

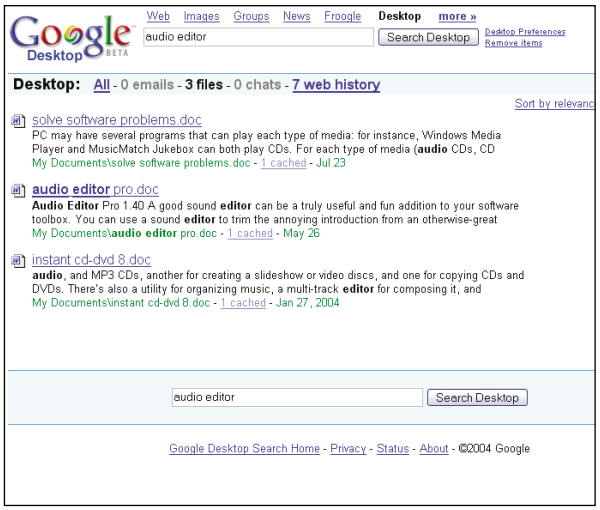
Copernic Desktop Search (free, www.copernic.com/en/products/desktop-search) is a PC search program that is, in many ways, even better than Google's tool.

Instead of accessing it through your Web browser, Copernic Desktop Search is a standalone application. That's not necessarily a better or worse way to do it, it's just a matter of preference. Copernic also adds a search field to the Windows Taskbar for convenient access. Searches are instantaneous, and when you select one of the items that it finds, the portion of the file that matches your keywords appears in a Preview Pane. This is a great way to hone in on the information you need without opening one file after another. If it finds too many files, you can refine your search by showing only files created by a certain program or modified within the last week, month, or year.

Copernic stands out because it can search through just about every type of file, including email messages, ZIP files, and even files on other PCs on your network. It can also search the browser history and bookmark files for Mozilla Firefox, not just Internet Explorer. Copernic is very configurable: For in-



Copernic Desktop Search can find text in PDF, HTML, Word documents, PowerPoint, and other types of files.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Google Desktop Search looks like the Google Web search engine but searches files on your PC, including email messages and instant message conversations.

stance, you can choose which directories to search and specify how often it should update its index.

Yahoo! Desktop Search

Yahoo! is the latest Web search company to get in on the Desktop search game with Yahoo! Desktop Search (desktop.yahoo.com, in beta). Like the other PC search tools, this free program can index and search your email messages, Microsoft Office files, PDF files, and many other types of documents.

Like Copernic, it is a standalone program. Its default search mode is more thorough than the others and can be a bit overwhelming: It found our search phrases in executable files and Windows help files, not just in the files we had created. A large preview pane shows full-page views of the files that match your search. Once you find the information you're looking for, you can open, print, or email that file with a click.

You can switch between Web search engines on a lark, trying one then another for the same search. But you can't switch Desktop search tools so easily: Before it can work, you need to install the tool so that it can index your hard drive. It isn't a good idea to install more than one Desktop search tool at a time because this can slow down your system. If you try one for a while and then want to try another, uninstall the old one first.

Truly Useful?

Do you need a Desktop search program? That depends on how much text-based information is on your computer and how well-organized you keep it. Searching the Web makes sense for everyone, but Desktop search tools are a different matter, Wilcox says. "What is it that people need to find? Your email is a pretty good candidate. Lots of people get lots of email and probably don't organize it very well, if at all." Instant messaging is another good use for Desktop search, he says. However, "the letter you wrote to your kid's teacher, you can probably find that without a search utility."

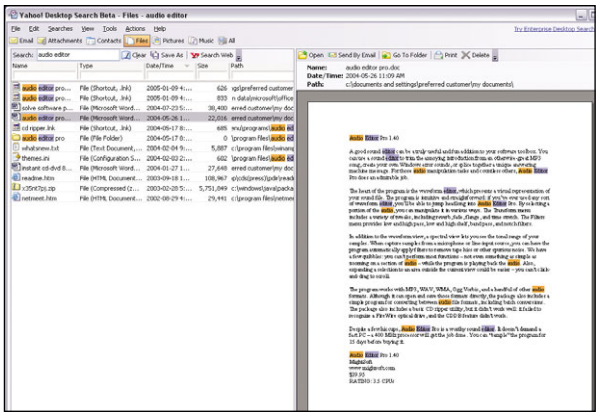
An area where Desktop search has room to grow, and to become truly useful to a greater number ofpeople, is in digital content. "That's where the Desktop search folks really are not operating yet," Wilcox says. When you import pictures from your digital camera, the default file names are meaningless. Similarly, MP3 and digital video file names aren't always very descriptive. "How do you make sense of that? Long term, what Desktop search could do to make consumers' lives easier is creating some meaning out of all this digital content that consumers are creating, particularly digital photos," he says.

The Future Of Search

For the companies that provide search services, the battle for users will continue. "For the next year, it will be more of the same: a battle of brand, of mindshare, and of use," Wilcox says. "The good thing for consumers is that there's more choice. All these companies battling means you have all these different utilities to choose from. Use a search engine that you like and let them fight it out."

As more and more information becomes available to us, both on the Web and on your computers' ever-expanding hard drives, we need better tools to sort through all of it and deliver the stuff that we really want. Search tools will continue to evolve, and we users will benefit from smarter, faster ways to find just the information we need. So if you are looking for a better way to locate a bit of information, you won't have to search very far. PCT

by Kevin Savetz



Yahoo! Desktop Search, the newcomer to the Desktop search scene, displays a full-page preview of each hit.